

## **State is monitoring mercury levels, identifying solutions**

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Utahns should be concerned that fish and waterfowl at several locations in Utah contain excessive levels of mercury.

The Utah Department of Environmental Quality certainly is. Utah has been testing for mercury in waters across the state routinely even before the issue drew media attention last February, when U.S. Geological Survey and Fish and Wildlife Service researchers gathering information on selenium in the Great Salt Lake reported finding high mercury levels. Even so, Utah Department of Environmental Quality (UDEQ) officials, in concert with the Division of Wildlife Resources and the Utah Department of Health, have stepped up mercury testing and monitoring of fish at several key sites around the state.



A statewide mercury work group was formed in a partnership effort to optimize coordination and share resources. The group involves federal, state and local government agencies working with environmental groups, citizens, sportsmen, businesses and other stakeholders to identify and prioritize issues, including sources, impacts and solutions.

We aim to develop a standardized sampling strategy, including sample collection procedures and analytical methods to be used, along with proper quality assurance measures. Utilizing shared resources will maximize results that ultimately will provide the most accurate information so people can make informed decisions on the risk and reducing the risk and exposures. The public is welcome to attend the meetings. People interested in receiving notification of the meetings can sign up at [subscribe-mercuryworkgroup@list.utah.gov](mailto:subscribe-mercuryworkgroup@list.utah.gov).

The public should understand that determining the sources of mercury that are contaminating Utah waterways and wildlife is a very complex

issue. Even though mercury levels in Utah's waters have not exceeded state water quality standards, the bio-accumulation in fish, ducks and other wildlife may pose health risks if eaten. Further study and research is needed to determine the sources and pathways that allow mercury to get into our state's waters and wildlife.

One pathway for mercury contamination is from air deposition, an extremely complex area that involves examining sources both inside and external to Utah, including emissions generated as far away as Asia. Air emissions of mercury occur as a result of natural sources such as volcanoes, forest fires and geothermal activity.

Manmade sources of mercury into the atmosphere include incinerators, scrap metal recycling (where mercury switches are not removed during salvage, before the scrap steel is recycled), legacy mining areas where mercury still is present in soils or waste rock and volatizes into the atmosphere, current mining activities that include processes that release mercury as a by-product and coal-fired power plants.

UDEQ is working with neighboring states to learn more on how releases of mercury from sources in nearby states, including the gold mines in Nevada, may be impacting the state of Utah. Monitoring and modeling of mercury air deposition are being undertaken in Utah. A state mercury emission rule is currently being drafted to further address this issue.

Wildlife Resources, UDEQ and the Health Department issued the first-ever duck advisory in the nation - two days before the opening of the duck hunting season. Utah's actions have prompted other states and tribal groups to seriously investigate if they should be assessing the risks of mercury contamination in ducks. Similarly, state health, environment and wildlife officials issued warnings last August about eating too many fish from Gunlock Reservoir near St. George and from Mill Creek near Moab.

To learn more about mercury, visit the state's Web site on the working group and the fish and waterfowl advisories:  
<http://www.deq.utah.gov/issues/mercury>.

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